

Syrian Refugees and Quality of Education in Jordan

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October, 2016

The Syria crisis has considered the world's largest humanitarian crisis since World War II. In other words, it has triggered the world's biggest refugee's crisis currently. Jordan has topped a list of ten countries which host more than half of the world's refugees, according to an Amnesty International (AI) report. Jordan, which has taken in over 2.7 million refugees, was ranked as the top refugee-hosting country (THE JORDAN TIMES, 2016) [1]. However Jordan provides generous efforts to enroll Syrian children in its public school system, but more 80,000 out of 226,000 Syrian children in Jordan were not in formal education during the last school year 2015-2016 (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, 2016). "A lost generation of Syrian children and youth is a slow-burning disaster for human rights and the region's future." (Van Esveld) [2].

Education is a fundamental human right and essential for the exercise of all other human rights. It's the heart of sustainable development and welfare system for any country in the world. However, in the 21st century, the quantitative approach in education is no longer dominant, because quality of education is the matter. In the absence of oil, gas and other natural resources, education with high quality is a must. Quality and diversity of education to meet the needs of the local and regional market

is crucial to achieve sustainable development, and develop a national diversified knowledge based economy. The World Bank has ranked Jordan as the best education system among Arab states in 2008 [3]. However, recently in the last two sessions of TIMSS; results showed that student at age 13 didn't improve, but even got worse than the years before (- 6%). In 2015, among 57 countries have participated in PISA for student at age 15; results showed that Jordan was in the list of the last ten countries. Moreover in the same year only 40% of the students who participated in the General Secondary Examination (Tawjihi) received a passing grade, (Queen Rania Al-Abdullah) [4]. Add to the aforementioned that Higher Education wasn't an exception, in January 2015 all university students graduating later in the year were for the first time required to take a national proficiency exam intended to evaluate the quality of education at the institutions at which they were studying. More than half of the kingdom's universities failed the exam overall, and no institution passed the tests in agriculture, computing and IT, engineering or science [5].

Syrian crisis has considered one of the biggest challenges behind worsening the quality of education in Jordan, or undermining its progress comparing with neighboring countries. Resulted in overcrowded classes; double-shift schools; increased education costs for the Government of Jordan; hard economic conditions lead to increase school dropouts and brain drain seeking a better pay abroad, often to Gulf states in particular; as well as students with divergent skills and educational backgrounds; and disparate level of qualifications [6], [7]. Moreover overcrowded classes is not only a school phenomenon, but some universities witnessed the same phenomenon due to receiving large numbers of refugees that continue to arrive from neighboring Syria, following a previous influx of Iraqis, as well as the large and growing size of the kingdom's student body; which is putting growing pressure on resources and straining the whole education system in the country, (Mohammad Amin Awwad, president's adviser, Philadelphia University) [8]. Syrian crisis forced the government of Jordan to shift some of education budget to other activities to accommodate the crisis. The Government only allocates 11% of budget for education, but according to UN Jordan should allocate one fourth of its budget to education. In 2015 nearly 150,000 Syrian students attended school in Jordan, which

is equivalent to 11 per cent of all students in the country, (Mohamed Al-Akour, Secretary General of the Jordanian Ministry of Education) [9]. However, donors are providing some support to help the kingdom bear the additional education costs, but level of support still insufficient. UNICEF, for example, only received \$17.07m by July 2014 for educational services for Syrian refugees out of \$42.46m needed [8b].

Education for Jordan is the most valuable resource to generate income and formulate the human capital in the country. Jordan is classified as a country of "high human development" by the 2014 Human Development Report [10]. Therefore, sustaining quality of education is among the country's highest priorities. Jordanian workforce has characterized by high quality and has a high reputation in the region especially in Gulf States. Accordingly, education with higher quality among Middle East countries, will boost this reputation, and benefit the economy from increased remittances from Jordanians working abroad. In addition, quality of education always has been the main driver to attract foreign students to enroll in the Jordanian higher education institutions. They accounted to more than 11 per cent of the undergraduates students registered at Jordanian universities in the academic year 2014/2015 [11]. Quality of education problem is alarming the government and authorities to start taking serious actions in order to tackle the problem and provide education with a good quality for both Jordanian and Syrian students. In OECD countries, the average class size at the lower secondary level is 23; however, some classes for Syrian children, numbered up to 85 students, (Mohamed Al-Akour, Secretary General of the Jordanian Ministry of Education, 2015) [12].

However, even before the Syria crisis, Jordan's education system has faced many challenges. Overcrowded classrooms even exist before the refugees' crisis. The Syria crisis caused highly overcrowded classes in the host communities, overcrowding is now closer to 47 percent. To make more classroom space available, many Jordanian schools operated on double shifts, more than 200 schools are operating on double-shift in the academic year 2016/2017. This enrolled more students, but lowered the quality of education. Each class is shortened, less time to do exercises and rest between classes. Time reduction was necessary to keep classes short enough to operate the double shift, but has resulted in a two-tier education system, with

reduced quality for Syrian and Jordanian students in double shift schools, and for Syrian students attending afternoon shifts in particular [13]. Students in the same classroom have different levels of education and may have spent long periods out of school. Teachers are relatively less experienced and well-trained to deal with such a situation. Moreover teachers in host communities say it's difficult to teach some Syrian children who showed clear signs of trauma. A growing number of Syrian children have psychosocial impact, because of the crisis (e.g. relatives killed due to the civil war). Accordingly, this led to unmotivated classrooms and teachers struggling to provide the right support. Add to the aforementioned that this could affect the general vibe of mixed classrooms (Refugees and Jordanian).

The world's governments have already adopted these two objectives: universal healthcare and universal quality education in the new Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2016). National and international steps towards education reform in Jordan have been taken, "Education reform should be a national priority", (King Abdullah II, 2016). "In the next five to 10 years there will be an increasing emphasis on quality rather than just student numbers", (Issa Batarseh, president of PSUT). "The Kingdom's national interest requires improving the quality of education", (Education Minister Mohammad Thneibat, 2015). Jordan and donors are working together to improve the quality of education for all children, which will help reduce intercommunal tensions. "Jordanian policymakers have recognized it is in the country's own best interest to ensure that Syrian children receive an education," (Van Esveld, 2016) [2b]. Accordingly, European Union, Germany, Norway, United Kingdom and United States, together with UNICEF, grant JOD 57.7 million to GOJ to provide education to all children in Jordan in the 2016/2017 school year, (Syrian Conference in London, 2016). This commitment is to place an additional 50,000 Syrian children in formal education without affecting the quality of education provided to Jordanian students. "The five donors have developed a joint vision to also strengthen the quality of the Jordanian education system and to expand its capacity; not only for Syrian refugees, but for all children in Jordan", (German Ambassador to Jordan, H.E. Ms. Birgitta Siefker-Eberle) [14]. UNESCO, along with QRTA and the Education Ministry, implemented the "Emergency Support to

Safeguard Education Quality for Syrian Students in Jordan"; the 4.3 million euro project, funded by the European Union, aimed at "sustaining quality education" for both young Syrian refugees and Jordanians affected by the humanitarian crisis in Syria [15].

Jordan's "Syria Response Plan" budgeted additional costs for education at \$249.6 million in 2016. The World Bank estimated that the Syria conflict cost Jordan \$2.5 billion annually [2c]. Donors and leading education support organizations like: USAID, UNDP, UNRWA, UNESCO and UNICEF have carried out a lot of efforts and programs in order to tackle the problem; and they have shifted their activities to give more focus on the qualitative approach than the quantitative one in this vital sector. Last but not least, GOV after collaborating with international donors and organizations to carry out many programs and initiatives. Hope not only to tackle the problem; but also improve the quality of education in order to impact the Jordanian economy; and to help the country provide better education with high quality for both Jordanian and Syrian students. At the end, Finland and Singapore are countries with similar situation to Jordan in terms of natural resources and many other factors, but they are among the best ranked education systems in the world; if they did it! So does Jordan.

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